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## THE POSSIBLE ROLE OF ART MUSEUMS IN REGARD TO EDUCATIONAL REFORM<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

This paper concerns ongoing educational reform in Slovakia and its goals as declared in the foundation document entitled *Learning Slovakia*. Within these goals, we have chosen those which are connected to freedom and supporting concepts of civil society. Besides the political circumstances of reform, we analyse art museums as educational institutions. The aim is to find common interests in education being provided both by schools and art museums, and especially how they may become partners in fulfilling the needs of a new school curriculum. To illustrate one possible way of partnership, we use examples of three individual educational programmes from the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava.

Key words: transformation process in education, educational reform, art museum education, freedom in education

### THE POSSIBLE ROLE OF ART MUSEUMS IN REGARD TO EDUCATIONAL REFORM

The Slovak Republic is currently in a turbulent stage of educational reform. Although there have been several attempts to bring the current school system closer to international trends, many of them failed due to complicated relationships between political representatives, schools and educators.

In 2016 the Slovak government came up with a new effort to solve some of the serious problems in the field of education. However, at the beginning of 2018 the situation regarding this announced educational reform

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still remains unclear. For bridging the gap in preparation, there are several ways for schools to move towards the goals of this reform through partnership with other institutions providing educational programmes.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE CIRCUMSTANCES BEFORE THE EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

In order to better understand the current situation regarding Slovak educational policy, we need to mention some of the main preconditions.

The current situation in the Slovak educational system is, to a large extent, a result of its former transformational phases. As Kosov and Porubsky (2011) state, although a socialist educational system was already in place, changes made in 1976 brought it closer to international trends, having several positive effects. The system was, however, still full of unsound theoretical difficulties, conceptual over-concentration on the school curriculum, and tendencies towards formalism in education. According to the authors, the above-mentioned features of socialist education in Slovakia led to the over-burdening of pupils.

After a short phase of political change characterised by the deconstruction of the old ideology, between 1992 and 1998 the Slovak republic entered the next phase, politically speaking, of two antagonistic tendencies – namely openness and closure which influenced the shape of the educational system. Thus, while political parties were enforcing the preservation of a high quality of education and maintaining the status quo, teachers were, in contrast, seeking to introduce essential changes in their educational approaches in order to implement innovative processes into the educational process. These innovative teachers were therefore introducing, for example, alternative educational concepts, creating a positive atmosphere in class, the application of cooperative strategies and critical thinking development. These changes had a hugely positive resonance. Despite the educational policy promoting merely minimal changes, this phase constituted a foundation for further modernisation and created favourable conditions for the subsequent political decisions in order to conduct the first system reform since 2001.

The above-mentioned innovative approaches of teachers further inspired the adoption of the National Programme of Training and Education for the Following 10–15 Years, entitled *Milenium*. This programme,

however, did not gain political support and, thus, the process stopped with just partial changes having been implemented (Porubský, 2014). As Kosová and Porubský (2011, p. 40) write about this situation: “Disappointed teachers surrendered in their battle with state bureaucracy and transformation began to stagnate.”

Kosová and Porubský (2011) point out that, since 2008, Slovak educational policy has finally begun to move towards creating legislative conditions for systematic reform. The reasons were, among others, the adverse performance of Slovakia in international OECD measurements in reading, mathematics and science. It needs to be stated that these scores were still present until 2015, as far as it is known from OECD data (OECD Data, 2015).

A new Education Act (2008) announced the implementation of a two-track curriculum, where the state educational system was supposed to define basic educational lines for individual types of school while the role of the school educational programme was to specify the state educational system, according to Vincejová (2013). The above-mentioned Education Act was the first legally approved change allowing organisational and educational autonomy for individual schools. The aim was to allow greater freedom in education for teachers, as well as to give them a possibility to decide when and how they would teach given content. However, as this new education content had not yet been created, the old educational standards were slightly adapted (Porubský, 2014).

As it has been shown, the pro-reform policy still remained declarative in its nature and real content reform was needed. In an atmosphere of several political establishment turnovers and a global economic crisis, the next phases in educational transformation proceeded as a correction of previous government decisions.

This concise summary of the transformation process shows how non-conceptual, long-lasting and ambivalent the process was, as well as why the new school reforms became so urgently required both for teachers and the public.

## SOURCES OF CURRENT EDUCATIONAL REFORMS AND *LEARNING SLOVAKIA*

The new wave of Slovak educational reforms started in 2016 when the incoming government declared a need to carry out fundamental changes

to the educational system in its policy statement (Programové vyhlásenie, 2016). These circumstances are an essential base for our goal to define art museums as a partner in the education process.

At the beginning of 2017, former Slovak Minister of Education, Science, Research and Sport, Peter Plavčan, gathered together six experts in order to create the support material for *Learning Slovakia*<sup>3</sup> as a foundation for the following educational reforms contained in a document entitled the *National Programme for Training and Education Development until 2027*. This support material was supplemented by public consultations, then finalised and sent to the new minister, Martina Lubyová, in October 2017.<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards, the minister deemed this document to be impracticable and in need of revision (Autorský document, 2017). The reason was that it did not contain any particular budget, timeframe, prioritisation or action plans. Since then, the process has stopped and a date for its resumption is still unknown.

Although various goals of the final document are formulated relatively broadly and it is not set to be submitted to government, we still consider it to be sufficiently factual. Our aim is to analyse it through the perspective of freedom as an important value in a civil society. Moreover, it reflects many of the past efforts of the transformation process, new trends and important visions for the future. It may also be expected that a majority of the articulated approaches will one day become a core part of the final educational reforms.

We have chosen several main aspects from *Learning Slovakia* in connection to the values which then will be subject of further analysis. It should be noted that many of them are common or substantially similar to the educational goals being used in art museums.

As the authors of *Learning Slovakia* (Burjan, Ftáčnik, Juráš, Vantuch, Višňovský & Vozár, 2017) have declared, the aim of the new educational reform programme is to reformulate school as an open and sociocultural

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<sup>3</sup> Eight chapters of the document *Learning Slovakia* are devoted to analysing the current situation and to proposing changes in a number of areas, namely: education quality and availability; the teaching profession; vocational education and training; the directing and financing of regional education; the quality, openness and availability of higher education; science, research and creative activities in universities and academies; the social mission of universities and academies; and the directing and financing of higher education.

<sup>4</sup> Former minister Peter Plavčan resigned, with Martina Lubyová taking up the position in September 2017.

institution. The main goal resonating from the whole document is to bring a new, individual teaching approach to pupils and students. Instead of currently ignoring weaker pupils, schools should nowadays support those with special needs. Schools should also be able to set their own lesson durations or class arrangements, to choose educational subjects by themselves and to end unpredictable state interference which complicates the educational process.

In terms of freedom, pupils and students should be allowed to educate themselves in groups with other pupils of their age group, and even with older or younger students together. A school should also provide opportunities for one to engage in more creative, practical, physical and manual activities, as well as so-called soft skills, such as communication training and presentation skills, team working, empathy, meeting challenges, conflict resolution and linking knowledge from various subjects. The majority of educational activities should take place outside the school building. Schools should be actively involved in public life and create a space for commenting on current affairs, as well as form critical thinking (Burjan, Ftáčnik, Juráš, Vantuch, Višňovský & Vozár, 2017).

The chosen ideas of reforming the education system are reactions to the current situation in Slovak schools where classes are ordered in a strictly standardised way. The moving around of pupils in class is often forbidden and they work mostly alone. The daily curriculum of an individual subject is narrowly focused on one topic prescribed long beforehand. In such an environment, it is very difficult to respond to current affairs, to exercise critical thinking and to take account of a pupil's own learning tempo.

Until the lengthy process of educational reform starts, schools have several possibilities regarding how they can overcome the issue of time and begin with some improvements in education. Many of these are already underway, depending on the individual teacher. Moreover, at this important individual level, schools may also take advantage of some other types of institutions.<sup>5</sup> Art museums constitute one of these, offering several benefits, although in *Learning Slovakia* they are mentioned just incidentally as possible places of education without any other characteristics.

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<sup>5</sup> Educational programmes for pupils in Slovakia and most of the other European countries are also offered by various types of institutions, mainly cinemas, libraries, philharmonic concert halls, various types of museums, observatories, zoological and botanical gardens, non-profit and non-governmental organisations, etc.

## LEARNING IN ART MUSEUMS

Art museums as institutions for preserving, researching and presenting cultural values through works of art, have a long tradition in education (Stránský, 2005). This kind of education is, however, often erroneously considered to be strictly focused on teaching about art theory, art history or art training.

According to Šobáňová (2014), the first milestone in museum education, namely an international conference entitled “New Museology” held in 1972 in Santiago de Chile, introduced strong influences into the field of museum education which still remain relevant today. The most important of them is accentuating an active role and a flexible approach to education, thus enabling prompt reactions to current sociocultural changes.

Another important advantage of museums is their demonstration to be a major aspect of any educational process. As Šobáňová (2014) claims, original artworks are used for demonstrating educational contents. The specific nature of artworks as a rare type of artifact lie primarily not in their role of a particular contribution to some historical event, as it is in a historical or natural museum artifact, but often refer to themselves as special symbols and fusions of sensual form and meaning. Works of art do not have just a factual layer, but also an emotional one and thus they are capable of affecting feelings and influence our value systems. However, the affecting of feelings and the influence on values may arise only if communication with a piece of art is attainable and a person starts to interpret it. Especially in the case of contemporary art, there is often a necessity to start with communication free from a conventional perception. To help with entering into such communication, art museums have already developed a whole set of progressive methods, aims, phases, forms and didactic tools which are gathered under the term “art museum” or “gallery education”.

According to Meyrowitz (as referred to by Kitzbergerová, 2013), an educational programme of art museums is, in connection to the above-mentioned features, supposed to create and provide a space for a creative and open understanding of the content of artworks or the message of an exhibition. A role of art museum educators is to create a situation which would help to uncover the deeper dimensions of art. This uncovering should be accompanied by finding conjunctions in the space beyond the exhibited objects and by linking this with other fields of knowledge. Thus, artworks

may also help in finding similar ways of linking things in everyday reality. An important aspect is that these contents are not necessary to be articulated or revealed in an exact way, while this discovery should be the natural component of engaging the layers of art. The perception of artworks also supports skills leading to simply looking in a sense of finding meanings that are not necessarily hidden, but those regarding which the person has to be careful and concentrated on during their search.

As it appears from the above, the objectives declared in the document *Learning Slovakia* match the objectives of art museum education in many respects.

## EXAMPLES FROM THE SLOVAK NATIONAL GALLERY

Our analysis continues with a description of a concrete way of providing educational programmes for school groups in one individual art museum institution, the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava.

We focus on two types of school, elementary and secondary. The reasons for focusing on these are because of the scope of how they are analysed in *Learning Slovakia*, as well as the high frequency of their attending educational programmes in the Slovak National Gallery.

The Slovak National Gallery (SNG) in Bratislava, established in 1948, is a typical European state memory institution with its own collections of art from the medieval era to contemporary art of local and wider European provenance. The artworks are presented mostly during thematic exhibitions related to specific art history and art theory issues, historical events and current sociocultural affairs. The normal duration of an exhibition is approximately two to three months.

Besides the operational offices connected to many other art museum functions, such as curatorial offices, archive workers, a department of digital collections and services, a department of marketing and programming etc., the SNG also has a special department for art museum education called the Department of Gallery Education. With a team of six internal employees and a wider range of external personnel, the department creates educational programmes not only for school children but also for many different target groups. Although the prepared educational programmes are always related to ongoing exhibitions, they do not necessarily have to operate with the message of exhibited objects, which are

often just an inspiration to developing a programme suitable for various age groups. The programmes take place in a free atmosphere and pupils and students are allowed to sit and stand in a way which is comfortable for them. A majority of programmes also involve physical activities. Each programme lasts approximately 90 minutes, occasionally more, and consists of two parts. The first part is usually more theoretical and it takes place as part of an exhibition where a theme is communicated through activities and discussion. The second part is more practical with a possibility of creating and allowing the participants' new knowledge to sink in through some practical work.

Both parts and their activities are specific forms of interpretation. The activities do not lead to accurate interpretation by making copies of artworks or artists' approaches, but rather to transmit an individual's experience of a new way of looking at things.

In this part we present several examples matching *Learning Slovakia* for various exhibitions and age groups of school children. The selection of programmes follows the ideas of the educational reform mentioned above.

#### UNDER THE SEA

The first example to be examined is an educational programme connected to the exhibition of a maker of contemporary art jewellery, Anton Cepka. The exhibition ran from March to June 2016. The prepared activities were suitable for 10 and 11-year-old children. The programme was entitled *Under the Sea* and it is an example of how a school and an art museum may cooperate in preparing the most appropriate activities in connection with the school curriculum. The British International School in Bratislava requested a programme which would fit into their project's educational form. The topic of the project was the sea and pupils were supposed to grasp it as a whole set of problems: ocean streams, sea plants and animals, global warming, chemistry basics and so on.

The jewellery artist, Anton Cepka, often works with some extraordinary shapes of technical devices such as radars, probes, submarines and planes. Some of his characteristic methods are pressing and imprinting various rasters on metal surfaces, using precious reflective gemstones and movable parts. Thus, the educators decided to direct the programme to the topic of physical underwater processes such as movement, light and pressure. After a short explanation of the physical aspects of the processes



involved, in the first part children were supposed to analyse how Cepka had utilised them during the creation of his artworks. In this part, cooperating in groups was required. Instead of making jewellery, during the practical part, which took place in a studio, children were supposed to create a water surface effect on transparent pieces of paper which were afterwards installed on a glass ceiling to simulate a view from below sea level (Pod morom, 2015). This programme is one of the examples of a school cooperating with an art museum, and of introducing an inter-disciplinary education.

#### FICTIONAL REALITY

The second example is an educational programme for older pupils of 14–17 years of age, thus those attending the last years of primary school and the first years of secondary school. The programme was prepared for an exhibition of Slovak photographer Martin Kollar, who often works with a principle of confusing viewers.

The exhibited photographs were created in Israel as a part of an international project mapping culture, society and the inner life of individuals. Confusion was present in how the photographs seemed to capture military actions or places bearing the scars of terrorism and how they seemed to constitute a documentary. A detailed look, however, revealed that they had presented just a staging of war during exercises, day-to-day activities or absurd situations not related to fighting (Hrabušický, 2015). These principles were the main sources of the educational programme called *Fictional reality* focused on realising the limits of reality in photography. In the first part, the pupils had an opportunity to find out for themselves during a short writing activity how important it is when perceiving any photograph to know its aim and its creators' intention. The writing activity aimed to explore the nature of basic photography and movie genres and its three grades of information value, namely: a documentary transferring as much information as possible; a reportage intermediating selected information; and artistic photography as a very subjective statement. Pupils could use this knowledge not only while perceiving any photography, but also in their everyday life. In the second practical activity they further discussed the importance of the way of looking at various entities around them and how one different angle could change their perspective. A result of the activity was a tool with mirrors for changing the point of view as a metaphor for

the programme topic. The activity we mention is an example of developing soft skills, of carefully looking and achieving a better understanding of day-to-day situations (Fiktívna realita, 2015).

#### ON A GREEN MEADOW

The third programme we describe is connected to one of the most controversial periods of modern Slovak history, the issue of art and propaganda in the Slovak State during the Second World War. Since the preparation phase of an exhibition entitled *Dream vs. Reality, Art and Propaganda 1939–1945*, educators were dealing with the question of how to communicate such difficult content as Slovak participation in the Holocaust and manipulation of the public by the use of propaganda. Moreover, the Slovak political situation evolved unfavourably with the election of an extreme right-wing political party to the Slovak parliament<sup>6</sup> in 2016 and, as is shown by several studies including that by Velšic (2017), those who voted for this party were mostly young people in the 18–39 years age bracket. The above-mentioned circumstances were to be taken into account while choosing the forms, contents and problems of the new programme. In respect to the thematic difficulty, educators decided to prepare not only one, but rather a cycle of several programmes which would provide a deeper insight into the problem of Nazism and nationalism. The cycle finally consisted of the three following programmes which were available as three different visits to the gallery.

In the first programme, there were several activities to strengthen empathy in the students. One of them was to make the participants think more about the problem of Jewish deportations and how the Slovak nation failed to take reasonable steps in order to prevent them. The activity started with allowing the students to mark out their own selected space with paper tape in one room of the exhibition. The room was, however, too small for all of them and thus some conflicts occurred when someone wanted more space. The students were therefore provided with a staged opportunity of realising how their own comfort often clashes with somebody else's comfort.

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<sup>6</sup> Kotleba – Ľudová strana naše slovensko gained 8.04% in parliamentary elections in 2016 and received 14 seats as a new party in the Slovak parliament.

In the following activity, one chosen person was supposed to stand up in a front of the others. The crowd was supposed to move in one line against the chosen person whose task was to stop the crowd without using violence. In the second step, the movement of the crowd was to be transformed into a rhythmical marching. Afterwards the members of the crowd were asked why they did not stop. They realised that it is much easier to stop thinking about the individual standing in front of them and how the effect of doing as others do may be stronger when in a stereotyped rhythm. This activity was related with making one's own decisions and being responsible for them.

The next important component of the cycle was the second part, prepared as a set of self-directed learning worksheets. These worksheets were not focused only on historical events but also on current affairs. They were entitled *Symbol, Literature, Folklore, Design* and *Etymology*, thus quite openly formulated topics usually considered to be non-problematic when they are not misinterpreted. The worksheets were therefore supposed to extend the student's scope. These worksheets were also published on two official websites developed by the Slovak National Gallery. The first one, entitled [webumenia.sk](http://webumenia.sk), is a portal for publishing digitalised artworks from various Slovak art museums. The second one is a special website devoted to the exhibition, where the visitors could find more information about selected chapters of these historical events. Thus, the worksheets could also be used for the educational purposes of other schools unable to travel to Bratislava.

The third and the final part of the cycle was conducted as a discussion in the gallery regarding the topics of the worksheets, as well as involving the principles of storytelling working with empathy in various other real life situations (Na lúke zelenej, 2016).

The analysis of the programme forms shows how responsive a gallery may be in reacting to current sociocultural affairs by preparing exhibitions on current themes, as well as by drawing up appropriate topics for educational programmes aimed at developing such soft skills as humanity and empathy. The chosen approach of publishing educational materials on the websites mentioned also shows another form of cooperation between a school and an art museum by providing additional information in order to fulfil the needs of a school curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted to analyse one possible way for schools to bridge time by creating a partnership with art museums. We compared the educational aims and forms of art museums with a foundation document of the reforms. The comparison showed that art museums, with their developed methodology and long tradition in providing educational programmes, are capable of meeting some of the needs of the new school educational system, such as reacting to current sociocultural affairs, developing several soft skills, employing inter-disciplinary education, providing a learning process in a free and relaxed atmosphere, joining creative elements together, and working in groups. As a tool for their educational purposes, they use original artworks with not only an informational but also a factual layer. Thus, an art museum's educational process may contribute to searching for deeper connections in everyday life.

We are aware that educational reform, as a part of a cultural change, requires a longer time to implement its goals. Art museums and features of their educational aims may, however, already be helping to shape its future form today.

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